

## Resistance through Video Game Play: It's a Boy Thing

*Kathy Sanford & Leanna Madill*

The male youth in our study used video games to resist institutional authority, hegemonic masculinity, and femininity. Videogame play offered them a safe place to resist authority, which was often limited to small acts of adolescent defiance that could limit their future ability to engage thoughtfully and critically in the world. This resistance shaped and reinforced their identity formation and supported their resistance to traditional literacy practices they considered more feminine. Adults were absent from their play; hence they had no mentorship in critiquing the worldview presented in videogames.

Key words: masculinity, identity, critical literacy, alternative literacies

Dans cette étude, les garçons se sont servis de jeux vidéo pour résister à l'autorité institutionnelle ainsi qu'à une représentation hégémonique de la masculinité et de la féminité. Ces jeux leur offraient un espace dans lequel ils pouvaient en toute sécurité opposer une résistance à l'autorité sous la forme de modestes gestes de défi typiques des adolescents. Ces gestes risquaient toutefois de limiter leur capacité future de s'engager dans le monde avec sérieux et en faisant preuve d'un esprit critique. Cette résistance a façonné et renforcé leur identité et concordait avec leur contestation des méthodes de littératie traditionnelles qu'ils considéraient comme plutôt féminines. Les adultes étaient absents lors de leurs jeux ; les jeunes n'avaient donc pas de mentors pour critiquer la vision du monde présentée dans les jeux vidéo.

Mots clés : masculinité, identité, littératie, esprit critique, littératies alternatives.

---

Youth, in particular boys, are finding many literacy activities, largely outside the realm of the school institution, that engage them and sustain long-term interest, e.g., video games (including computer and console systems). These games provide an interesting, engaging, dynamic, social space for many types of boys, both those who succeed at school literacy

and those who struggle; they do not have to fit into any particular affinity group, they can engage without interference or sanction from adults, whenever they choose or when they have opportunities, and in ways that provide social capital for making connections with peers in real-time and virtual spaces. The lack of boys' success in formal schooling activities, so frequently reported in public press, can, we argue, be framed as resistance, both unconscious and conscious, against meaningless, mindless, boring schooling or workplace activities and assignments; instead, they engage in activities that provide them with active involvement and interest. Videogame play also serves as a form of resistance to stereotypical views of boys as a category who, by virtue of the fact that they are boys, has been categorized as unsuccessful learners – videogames are spaces where players can be successful in their endeavours.

#### VIDEO GAME CULTURE, GENDER, AND NEW AND CRITICAL LITERACIES

##### *Video Game Culture*

According to the Kaiser Family Foundation study *Kids, Media, and the New Millennium*, boys and girls differ in the amount of time engaged with media. Girls aged 8-18 spent less time per day than boys with the combination of media surveyed. Boys spent more time with TV, video games, and computers than did girls who spent more time with music media and print materials (as cited in Newkirk, 2002, p. 42). Rowan, Knobel, Bigum, and Lankshear (2002) report similar findings, claiming that "girls use the internet more than do the boys surveyed, but the girls use it more for educational purposes" (p. 131). The Canadian Teachers' Federation (2003), in *Kids' Take on Media: Summary of Findings*, report that almost 60 per cent of boys in grades 3-6 play video or computer games almost every day, 38 per cent for boys in grade 10. For girls, 33 per cent of grade-3 girls play interactive games every day, but only 6 per cent of grade 10 girls (p. iv).

Boys and male youth are far more involved in videogames than are girls. By engaging in these activities that resist traditional literacy learning, video game players are keeping up with the changing technological world faster and more productively than schools are. Gee

(2000) describes this changing world: "If our modern, global, high-tech, and science-driven world does anything, it certainly gives rise to new semiotic domains and transforms old ones at an even faster rate" (p. 19).

"Attempts to assess the effects of video games on young people have been extensive," report Alloway and Gilbert (1998), "and have come from a variety of research domains and methodologies" (p. 95). Although some studies (Alloway & Gilbert, 1998; Alvermann, 2002, Rowan, Knobel, Bigum, & Lankshear, 2002) have focused on connections between gender and videogame play, many have focused on these issues separately, addressing videogame play and learning (Gee, 2003), identity development through videogame play (Filiciak, 2003), the nature of computer games (Myers, 2003), the value of videogames (Newman, 2004), and gendered marketing strategies for videogames (Ray, 2004).

Although videogame culture is strongly male-focused and masculinist, developing aggressive themes and situations (Alloway & Gilbert, 1998), often children and youth are represented as a homogeneous group, ignoring issues of difference connected to gender (Kline, 2004) and differing impacts on diverse populations.

#### *Gender and Masculinity*

Gender as a social construct impacts learning both in and out of school, dictating what is and can be learned and what is out of bounds. Gender, and therefore masculinity, is not fixed in advance of social interaction, but is constructed in interaction, and masculinity must be understood as an aspect of large-scale social structures and processes (Connell, 1995, p. 39). From a poststructural perspective, there are multiple ways of being a male and creating/negotiating male subjectivity. These multiple and diverse positions open up the possibility of constituting subjectivity as multiple and contradictory (Davies, 1992): every individual male accesses, performs, and transforms multiple versions of masculinity in various contexts and at various times. There are multiple ways that masculinity is performed; however hegemonic versions of masculinity are most highly valued, that is, performances of masculinity that embody "the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (Connell, 1995, p. 77).

Family activities and values transfer into schooling practices where notions of masculinity (often linked to images of such things as strength, cleverness, winning, power, and status) are further developed and reinforced, creating powerful sites for gendered messages to be reinforced by teachers and young people themselves (Browne, 1995; Sanford, 2002). Hegemonic masculinity not only naturalizes masculine behaviours, but also male discipline areas, such as science, mathematics, mechanics, and technology – those areas seen to require rational, unemotional engagement.

Males and females develop attitudes towards science and machines differently, and at a very young age. As Ray (2004) notes, the concept of the computer as a male object is reinforced in children very early in their lives. Males, given machine-type toys, including computers, are encouraged to experiment with them; they are more likely to receive training (formal and informal) in using computers. One young participant in our study commented, “You’ve got to know how to make what go where and stuff. I learned some of that from a game manual, mostly just clicking around … that’s how I learn that kind of thing, just trial and error.” Males, like this participant, are socialized to engage with computers and video games.

#### *New and Critical Literacies*

In this article, we have discussed not only how males use videogames to create resistances, but also our concerns related to videogame play when viewed simply as another form of “text.” We have raised questions about operational, cultural, and critical dimensions of learning. Based on a socio-cultural perspective in examining new or alternative literacies comprehensively, we draw on Green’s (1997) three-dimensional model that considers operational, cultural, and critical dimensions of literacy and learning. Operational literacy “includes but also goes beyond competence with the tools, procedures, and techniques involved in being able to handle the written language system proficiently. It includes being able to read and write/key in a range of contexts in an appropriate and adequate manner” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003, p. 11). Cultural literacy “involves competence with the meaning system of a social practice; knowing how to make and grasp meanings appropriately within the

practice ... this means knowing what it is about given contexts of practice that makes for appropriateness or inappropriateness of particular ways of reading and writing" (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003, p. 11). Critical literacy addresses "awareness that all social practices, and thus all literacies, are socially constructed and 'selective': they include some representations and classifications – values, purposes, rules, standards, and perspectives – and exclude others" (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003, p. 11). We believe that as educators embrace videogames as a powerful learning tool (Gee, 2003), they must also find ways to raise critical questions relating to these texts and to disrupt unexamined hegemonic masculine attitudes related to power, status, and exclusivity.

#### METHODOLOGY

In this article, we examine video games as a domain that many boys and men choose to resist traditional school-based literacy, and examine how they use games to resist controlling societal forces and so-called feminized spaces such as home, daycare, and school. Given the considerable and growing involvement of boys with this alternative form of learning about literacy, technology, and the world, it is critical for both males and females that researchers and educators examine the implication of this male immersion into these new semiotic and technological domains.

In this study, we elucidate the complexity of the interplay between gender and videogame play, to better understand the nature of the learning done by male youth, and to consider the impact of this learning on them and on others in society. We observed the youths (predominantly male) in this study as they engaged in the literacy practice of videogame play as a discursive tool. These observations provided a context in which we examined the performance of gender subjectivities through a range of alternative literacy practices (Gee, 1992; Street, 1984).

##### *Participants and Data Collection*

The informants for this study included two groups of participants/players. The first group, six young adolescent males attending a middle school in a small Canadian community, volunteered

to participate in this study. Throughout the year, we observed them at school, both in classrooms and in less regulated spaces such as the hallways, out-of-doors, and in computer labs. We interviewed each participant twice throughout the year, where the discussion focused on his use of and interest in computers generally and game playing particularly. We transcribed the interviews, and used the first interview to shape the discussion of the second interview.

Our second group of participants, five young adult males, referred to us by acquaintances and selected for their interest in videogame play, were observed and videotaped in their home environments, playing videogames both independently and with a friend. We interviewed them in-depth two to three times over three months, where they discussed the nature of their videogame playing and reflected on the influences of videogame play on their lives. As with the first group, we transcribed the interviews, using the first interview to shape the focus of subsequent interviews. Both groups of participants, from the same geographical region, were predominantly from white, middle-class backgrounds. Our gender as two white females might have initially imposed barriers; however, the participants became very willing to share their ideas and expertise about videogames and helped us understand their specific references and to share their insider knowledge.

The interviews were analyzed and coded using NVivo text analysis software program. The data were coded into categories, mapped, searched, synthesized, and analyzed. We also conducted manual coding of themes to supplement the computer analysis which we shared with boys. To recognize themes of significance, we used critical discourse analysis to identify oppositions, recurrent key terms, and subjects spoken about by the participants and connected to the videogames identified by the participants.

#### FINDINGS

A significant theme that we identified through the analysis was the participants' perception of resistance as they engaged in videogame play: resistance to institutional authority, hegemonic masculinity, and femininity. These themes often overlapped or were sometimes even contradictory as the participants talked about how and why they played.

Some of the forms of resistance were consciously selected (resistance to societal rules and resistance to school) while others were not consciously selected, but seemed to us to be pushing back on some of the restrictions and taboos they faced in school and current Western society (versions of restrictive masculinity and at the same time all types of femininity).

Through discussions with the participants, we learned what games they played, the types of games available, and their operational critique of the games (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003). We observed and videotaped the young adult players as they engaged in a variety of games (e.g., NBA Live 2005; Grand Theft Auto: Vice City; Counter Strike). Surprisingly to us, the games discussed by the adolescents and the young adults were very similar. They identified a range of game types: role play games - RPG (Final Fantasy, Halo), First Person Shooter - FPS (Max Payne, Medal of Honour, James Bond), Strategy/Simulation (Sims), Real Time Strategy - RTS (Counterstrike), Multi-genre role play/First Person Shooter (Grand Theft Auto), sports games (NBA 2005; Triple Play 2001, NHL Hockey 2002), and Movie games (Harry Potter, Star Wars, Punisher, Man Hunt) as being games they chose to spend hours playing, with their friends or on their own. Boys and male youth are engaging in the same types of videogames as adults, even though the games are intended for mature adult players (Canadian Teachers' Federation study, 2003).

#### *Sites of Resistance*

We examined the role(s) that videogames play for males in challenging existing societal norms and expectations as they sought to define their masculine subjectivities in appropriate ways. Popular culture and media have historically been used as sites of resistance, whether through music, banners, graffiti, or alternative newspapers (Guzzetti & Gamboa, 2004) and this use of popular media continues today to resist constricting forms of education that stereotype, limit learning opportunities for segments of the population, and prevent meaningful learning for a rapidly increasingly global, technological, and digital world. Videogame players demonstrate many examples of resistance through challenges to rules and structures imposed by existing societal regulation and through challenges to restrictive identity formations and stereotypes.

Three significant areas of potential conflict and resistance include: institutional authority, hegemonic masculinity, and femininity. There are many ways in which students, particularly boys, overtly resist the hegemony of adult authority, and videogame play offers them a safe place to contest these power structures.

*Resistance to Institutional Authority.* Whether purposefully or unconsciously, youth engage in practices that serve to resist imposition of structures and rules currently prevailing in society. These rules are challenged in both private and social spaces. Even when speaking to us as researchers, the participants seemed more willing to share their expertise once it was clear that we were not negatively judging their videogame play. Players shared their frustrations and (either overtly or subtly) opposed authority within their cultural groups, ignoring and reshaping the rules. As they gained skills and confidence in playing games, they felt more able to resist traditional authority, relying on their fellow gamers for support and understanding – of the risks, the meaning, and the value. “I like lots of videogames,” said one younger participant, “though there are some games that I had to defend that adults would think are stupid.” They received immediate feedback not only from the game but also from their peers as they developed greater skill and confidence in playing the game.

The world of school, followed by the world of work, offers many routinized, dull tasks that do not offer the qualities reported by males as required for meaningful engagement, that is, personal interest, action, fun, purpose, or opportunities for success (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Blair & Sanford, 2004). Instead, they faced a world of ordinariness, lacking excitement or purpose. “I get bored quite a bit,” one adolescent participant told us, “at school and at home. Then I usually go up and play on the computer.” All the adult male participants explained that they used games to “zone out,” to stop thinking or engaging with real people in their lives who have demands and remind them of their responsibilities. Videogames enabled players to create fantasy worlds for themselves where they were heroic, active, and respected.

Videogames also offer opportunities for players to learn information in alternate multi-modal ways through playing videogames, unlike traditional school learning that is most often linear and book based.

Engaging in *Medal of Honor: Pacific Assault* allows youth to gain information about a significant historic event, but goes far beyond transmission of facts because adrenaline allows the players to feel the experience through sound and vibration, newer aspects of videogame play. Simulation games (Sim City, Speed Racing, Air Strike) enable players to learn about valued workplace and life skills, such as driving a car, flying a plane, or building a city. The immersion experiences that are promised, engaging players in the action, enabling them to feel the exhilaration and the fear, create a far more powerful and memorable learning experience than the reading of a textbook. One young adolescent participant reported, "I've learned tons about history, tons and tons, from *Civilization 3*. You just learn lots of stuff, and you don't really think about it." Not a far stretch, then for students to begin to challenge the material (both content and format) being presented in school, and to resist the linear, uni-dimensional approach to learning that is so often used in school.

Videogames provide many opportunities for players to explore alternatives to the reality of adult society and its patriarchal, imposed rules. These rules, or laws, create restrictive structures that adolescents yearn to resist. As one young adult commented, "...it's cool, you can just explore ... you can fly with a jet pack, break into an airport, grab some pizza ... you're not limited to what you can do." Through videogame play, they can try out resistant and dangerous choices and experience the consequences, all within the safety of game play. The opportunity to adopt an alternative persona and to experience characters' perceptions and actions, which are often inappropriate or illegal actions in the real world, and usually have no consequences, was a powerful enticement. One young adult participant commented,

"You take street racing that's illegal and you take new cars and you soup them up and you make them look all flashy and crazy... and you race them on the street, swerving in and around other cars and things like that – it's slightly rebellious or whatever, but I'd like to see what that's like."

The players assume authority as the game character and thereby gives their individual consent for the actions and attitudes that they role play (Leonard, 2004). Playing games that transgress societal, family, and school rules and norms enables a freedom to experiment with and

challenge existing restrictions that, while providing safety, are also limiting and dull. Trying on resistant thoughts and actions is highly appealing to our participants.

The technology of videogames allows players to cheat by downloading codes or finding glitches in the game. One participant explained that players use cheats<sup>1</sup> because "at the moment they're so angry or frustrated with the game that they just want to go ahead, or they wonder, Wow! It would be so great if I had that." By using cheats, and engaging in a community that understands the purpose of cheats and the importance of them, players can band together to resist traditional and mainstream rules as a community, using their social connections to succeed at their game play.

Many videogame story lines encourage players to resist society's expectations. From stealing cars to killing enemies or random people, the game allows players to play out scenarios that they would never actually do: "It's kinda fun to do because it's not something that you would do everyday, obviously." Videogames allow players to forego the rules of the real world and engage in a new fantasy frontier where they can be mavericks, able to ignore rules that others have to abide. When players state that the reason they play video games is to escape, they suggest that they are not having to think critically about what they play: "I definitely play it to get into the role and forget about other things" and "I just go and play it and space out" are answers from our adult participants as to why they play video games. This attitude allows them the right to ignore stereotypes, prejudices, or other usually conflicting messages that they would otherwise not be allowed to (or even want to) participate with. "It's like a feeling of power, but it's sadistic," one adult participant explained, "You really enjoy it, like killing someone, blasting them in the head ... maybe it's cause you can't do it, it's such a forbidden thing, but like they make it so real and powerful, like in a game you can have the ability to smoke people continuously." Another participant commented, "I don't know why I enjoy it, I imagine myself living in Vice City [Grand Theft Auto] just doing missions and you can kill people and steal cars and just do bad stuff. You do all these things that you don't necessarily want to do, but it gives you so much power...". To succeed the

participants engaged in the rules of the game, even if the rules did not match socially constructed values or rules.

*Resistance to Hegemonic Masculinity.* Western society has responded to expanded and alternative gender positions with a rigid homophobic stance regarding masculinity. Young males today are faced with a fierce policing of traditional masculinity, and the rules of masculinity are enforced in many overt and subtle ways. Being a male who does not exhibit characteristics of physical strength, individuality, and machismo can find the world dangerous and lonely space (Connell, 1995; Frank, Kehler, & Davison, 2003; Kehler, 2004; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2001). Videogames provide players with spaces in which to experiment with identity: to safely resist traditional masculinities currently prevailing in society, or conversely, to demonstrate their heterosexual masculinity and resist connections to the feminine, and to challenge societal expectations of appropriateness regarding attitude, appearance, or behaviour. By adopting roles through which they can experiment with their identity formation, they can expand their sense of self and understand their world from new perspectives. One adult participant negotiated his identity as he described a game, "In *Halo*, I really like that it is shoot 'em up, not that I am a killer, but you know... I just like that it is go and shoot, shoot, and kill, kill, kill."

In another interview, an adult male participant was asked what characteristics of male video game characters he admired. He responded: "I'd like to have the big body, a six-pack not an 8 pack! ... I'd like to be built; I don't want to be a drug dealer, king of the city." When he was asked, "What about saving the girl?" he answered, "That would be neat .... I've often had dreams about that, meeting a girl by doing something courageous, you know." Another adult participant commented on his desire to be a hockey player. "I didn't ever play hockey; I don't know the rules. But in the game I'm always trying to start a body check or start a fight ... I like all the silly things like how the glass breaks when you do a body check."

Videogames provide a way to resist traditional hegemonic masculinities in a safe space, to play out alternative personas, such as personas of men of colour or of females. In reality, not all males are strong and macho (and may not want to be), but they may wish to try on

the persona of a rugged heroic figure who rescues the weak from dangerous situations. By using on-line forums and Internet gameplay, subjectivities can be disguised and trans/reformed in myriad ways. One participant talked about a friend whom he described as a "very fairy tale type of person, similar to the *Everquest* type of thing. He's kind of creative, and likes imaginary types of stuff." This friend was able to engage in the videogame as a character who did not display traditional masculinity traits, yet in the context of the game it was safe for him to do so. However, his alternative masculine persona might not have been as safe to perform in reality.

As suggested earlier in this article, the media and the public have categorized boys as regularly experiencing failure in school, of underperforming, and of being less literate than girls. Videogames provide spaces where boys can dominate and create an alternative sense of success. They are finding many activities that engage them and sustain long-term interest; videogames provide an interesting, engaging, dynamic social space for many types of boys who do not have to fit into any particular category. Videogames also allow for the creation of additional social spaces where boys from various social groups (athletes, trades, academics, rebels) can belong, resisting imposed societal roles and positions. By creating fantasy personas for themselves, heroic powerful figures able to rescue innocent girls and garner the respect of their peers, they resist the traditionally stereotypical ways they are viewed in society. Additionally they develop skills that are valued in the workplace, giving them future social capital through which to be successful.

By connecting to communities, face-to-face or on-line communities, and engaging in extensive rounds of play, players gain skills in manual dexterity, ability to read multiple screens or texts simultaneously, and make quick, accurate decisions based on information provided. These operational literacies referred to earlier in this article (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003) teach the mostly male players how to use many functions of computers, to make repairs and adjustments to programs and glitches, to make accurate predictions, and to apply their knowledge to new situations – most importantly, they gain a confidence in their ability to use computers effectively, not just videogames, but many aspects of

computers. This confidence enables them to resist traditional school literacies, choosing instead modes of literacy that support the particular type of masculine persona they have selected for themselves, and make a commitment to that self-selected identity. As Gee (2003) comments, "Such a commitment requires that they are willing to see themselves in terms of a new identity, that is, to see themselves as the *kind of person* who can learn, use, and value the new semiotic domain" (p. 59, italics in original). And if they are successful, then they will be valued by and accepted in that affinity group.

*Rejecting Femininity.* One way that male game players use videogames as a form of resistance is to create a clearly non-female identity, that is, muscular, big, and dangerous-looking. Although it is interesting to try on different personas, even those of females, it is personally dangerous to associate oneself with the feminine. One young adult male participant explained how sometimes a friend of his might choose to be the princess in a Mario Bros. game and they would all tease him. "We started calling him princess." This adult participant is a football player in real life and he attempted to masculinize his interest in videogames; he comments,

"I don't think many girls are too interested in playing a game of *Dead or Alive* and seeing another girl's scantily clad body bounce around like it is, that kind of stuff appeals to guys. It's on more of a primal level, just kinda like one-on-one combat. It really turns guys on for some reason."

He differentiates males from females in this sexual way, and includes himself in this masculine description; he is not sure why males are drawn to these primal interests but is not inclined to question his theory or his participation in this world.

A similar example of resistance within the role playing games is the type of avatars (game characters) that players select to become in the videogames. The selected character is often the strong, independent rebel, such as in *Max Payne*, all the *Grand Theft Auto* games, *Man Hunt*, and *Counter Strike*; one adult gamer described these characters as "not really dependent on anyone else, very like 'I am going to do this my way.'" The players' desire to shape their identity as rugged, independent, and strong precludes them from making choices of characters who seem weak, dependent, and feminine. This same

participant talked about Max Payne as a character he admired. "He's kind of a dark and lonely character, very dark and devious, and he talks with kind of a low deep voice and he's very masculine and he usually gets with one woman in the storyline."

Although choice of creating videogame characters helps the players to experiment with diverse subjectivities, again the hegemonic masculinity model looms large in most of the games the participants report playing regularly. As they negotiate their sense of self through various videogame characters, we worry that they are reinforcing the binary that relegates females to subordinate positions and does not allow any space or opportunity for a critical reading of the gender positions offered in the games.

#### DISCUSSION

There is no question in our minds that videogames encourage resistance to school values, parental authority, and societal expectations, and partly because of the perception of resistance are hence a major attraction for youth. Videogames are fun, and this is partly because they are perceived as dangerous, entering forbidden territory. There is no doubt that videogame players are developing an understanding of learning principles through playing games, as suggested by Gee (2003), in relation to text design, intertextuality, semiotics, transfer of knowledge, or probing and identifying multiple approaches. However, we are not convinced that, as Gee claims, there is significant learning about cultural models. We did not find evidence that learners were thinking consciously and reflectively about cultural models of the world, or that they were consciously reflecting on the values that make up their real or videogame worlds. The resistance that we have observed in one area of the players' lives did not necessarily lead to resistance of imposed stereotypical and potentially harmful beliefs and attitudes. Resistance to hegemonic hypermasculinity in game play does not necessarily lead the players to challenge gender stereotypes, or present themselves to the world in alternative representations of masculinity. And although resistance to anything feminine enables male players to develop their own subjectivity, it does not cause them to be more aware of their privileged positions of power or to respect difference in any significant

way. We are concerned that the resistances made possible by videogame play serves only to reify the traditional stereotypes and cement them firmly in place.

There is, perhaps, a place to encourage resistance on a more conscious and responsive level through videogame play. Is it possible that spaces for critical questioning can be identified and taken up in relation to the images, actions, attitudes, and values being presented at hyperdrive speeds throughout the duration of a videogame? As we began to see in our interviews with young adult males, there is a place for them to critically examine their motivation and attitudes as they engage in games. Critical questions, such as those posed by Rowan and colleagues (2002), can help to shape resistances that change the world, rather than merely playing with the world as it exists.

- Who and what are included? What groups of people are included or excluded? How do you know?
- What do those who are included get to do? What roles are taken by men/boys, women/girls? What evidence do you have?
- Which people and roles are valued and how is this communicated?
- Who has control? Who has access to power? Who exercises power? Who acts independently? Who initiates action?
- What are various people rewarded for and with?
- In what ways does the inclusion or exclusion reflect to your own life?
- What are the consequences of this relationship?
- What alternatives are there? (pp. 117-118)

These types of questions enable engagement with and purpose for resistance, encouraging videogame players to look beyond the superficial qualities of action, speed, and excitement to a consideration of more fundamental levels of meaning and value that includes issues of power, control, and difference.

#### CONCLUSION

Popular media has historically been used as sites of resistance, through underground newspapers, graffiti, and music. And it is being used today

to resist constricting forms of education that stereotype, limit learning opportunities, and prevent meaningful learning for a rapidly and increasingly global, technological, and digital world. The speed at which literacies are being challenged and reshaped defies institutional support and knowledge from maintaining the pace. Children create connections when they learn: "Our experiences in the world build patterns in our mind, and then the mind shapes our experience of the world (and the actions we take in it), which, in turn, reshapes our mind" (Gee, 2003, p. 92). Gee acknowledges that the harmful side of patterned thinking can lead to prejudices or stereotypes. If videogames are a main area from which players gain knowledge about a certain type of person, setting, or event then knowledge is heavily influenced by the limitations, biases, and values found in the videogames. It is these potentially harmful effects that cause us to draw on Lankshear and Knobel's (2003) framework that includes a critical dimension of literacy and learning, and to recognize the need for further research into the effects of videogame playing in the longterm, both for boys and for girls.

Through an examination of the opportunities for resistance to traditional authority and identity formation through videogame play, we can see the multiple types of literacy learning that are possible. Players are developing a wide range of useful operational knowledge that can be used as social capital in the workplace. As discussed previously, they are gaining a confidence in using new technologies, a belief that they can use and create programs effectively; they are becoming accomplished at making speedy decisions and reactions, developing a new level of manual dexterity, and are able to read/process multiple pieces of information (text or screen) simultaneously.

However, as Gee (2003) points out, it is the potentially harmful effects of such opportunities for subversive and localized resistance as videogame play afford that also need to be interrogated. Educators and researchers need to be aware of the cultural and critical literacies that may or may not be addressed through the extensive videogame play that is currently in vogue with many boys and young men. Resistance to the videogame representations of gender, race, and sexual orientation are generally uni-dimensional and highly stereotypical; these can serve to reinforce societal prejudices that maintain hegemonic patriarchal power

structures and understandings if the various types of resistance available to game players are not recognized and encouraged. More thought needs to be given to considerations of appropriateness related to specific contexts, indeed appropriateness of values and respect for diverse perspectives needs to be encouraged and supported.

In our observations of videogame play, we believe that the speed of decision making and action taking in videogames mitigates any reflective element of the game beyond how to win – during game play there is often little opportunity to consider alternative, more complex issues and decisions. There is opportunity to learn and experience historical events in multiple modes, but space and encouragement to reflect upon which of these perspectives holds more evidence of ethical and moral truth is also important.

Clearly evident in discussion with these videogame players is an element of critical literacy in relation to technical and technological qualities of videogames, in relation to the realism of visual components of the games, and in relation to comparisons with other modes of interaction. The participants are highly articulate about aspects of the game that function well, glitches in the games, and visual elements of the game. However, we are concerned about a lack of demonstrated critical thought in relation to alternate worldviews and perspectives on socio-cultural issues. As Lankshear and Knobel (2003) suggest,

to participate effectively and productively in any literate practice, people must be socialized into it. But if individuals are socialized into a social practice without realizing that it is socially constructed and selective, and that it can be acted on and transformed, they cannot play an active role in changing it. (p. 11)

If players are not critically engaged in the literacies of videogames, they will not be able to understand the transformative and active production aspects of meaning making; rather they will be limited to existing in and engaging with literacies as they are created by others. There will be little room for players to consider the origins of the games, who creates the characters and the commercial aspects of the games, and the values that are subtly (or overtly) being perpetuated and encouraged.

Both educators and researchers need to consider whether the resistance to authority and to identity shaping enables future citizens to

engage critically in the world, or whether their resistance is limited to small acts of adolescent defiance. Is the nature of their resistance limited itself to the individual or self-selected affinity group, or does their engagement in oppositional interactions engage the broader world? Do videogames desensitize players from moral and ethical responsibility for the world? Do videogames support concern for environmental and ecological realities that continue to consume the human and natural world or do they provide escapes from these global issues?

Further, how are schools developing the increased sophistication in operational literacies, but also creating opportunities for students to engage with cultural and critical literacies that are so necessary for the twenty-first century? How are schools understanding and addressing the knowledge capital that will be needed by our future generations for being successful in an increasingly technological and changing world? These are some of the concerns that need to be taken up by educators and researchers as they attempt to gain deeper and broader understandings of the nature of videogame learning and the nature of resistance.

#### NOTE

<sup>1</sup> Cheat is a code a player can enter into the game to make play easier.

#### REFERENCES

Alloway, N., & Gilbert, P. (1998). Video game culture: Playing with masculinity, violence and pleasure. In S. Howard (Ed.), *Wired Up: Young people and the electronic media* (pp. 95-114). London, UK: UCL Press.

Alvermann, D. (Ed.). (2002). *Adolescents and literacies in a digital world*. New York: Peter Lang.

Blair, H. & Sanford, K. (2004). Morphing literacy: Boys reshaping their school-based literacy practices. *Language Arts*, 81(6), 452-460.

Browne, R. (1995). Schools and the construction of masculinity. In R. Browne & R. Fletcher (Eds.), *Boys in schools: Addressing the real issues* (pp. 224-233). Sydney, AU: Finch Publishing.

Canadian Teachers' Federation. (2003). *Kids/ take on media: Summary of finding*. Retrieved April 6, 2006, from [www.ctf-fce.ca/en/projects/MERP/summaryfindings.pdf](http://www.ctf-fce.ca/en/projects/MERP/summaryfindings.pdf)

Connell, R. W. (1995). *Masculinities*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press.

Davies, B. (1992). Women's subjectivity and feminist stories. In C. Ellis & M. Flaherty (Eds.), *Investigating subjectivity: Research on lived experience* (pp. 53-76). London, UK: Sage Publications.

Filiciak, M. (2003). Hyperidentities: Postmodern identity patterns in massively multiplayer online role-playing games. In M. Wolf & B. Perron (Eds.), *The videogame theory reader* (pp. 87-102). New York: Routledge,

Frank, B., Kehler, M., & Davison, K. (2003). A tangle of trouble: Boys, masculinity and schooling, future directions. *Educational Review*, 55(2), 119-133.

Gee, J. P. (1992). *The social mind: Language, ideology and social practice*. New York: Bergin & Harvey.

Gee, J. P. (2000). Teenagers in new times: A new literacy perspective. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 43, 412-420.

Gee, J. P. (2003). *What video games have to teach us about learning and literacy*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

Green, B. (1997, May). Literacies and school learning in new times. Keynote address at the Literacies in Practice: Progress and Possibilities Conference, South Australian Department of Education and Children's Services and the Catholic Education office, Adelaide, Australia.

Guzzetti, B. J., & Gamboa, M. (2004). Zining: The unsanctioned literacy practice of adolescents. In C. Fairbanks, J. Worthy, B. Maloch, J. Hoffman & D. L. Schallert (Eds.), *53rd yearbook of the National Reading Conference* (pp. 208-217). Oak Creek, WI: National Reading Conference.

Kehler, M. (2004). "The Boys" interrupted: Images constructed, realities translated. *Education and Society*, 22(2), 83-99.

Kline, S. (2004, January). Technologies of the imaginary: Evaluating the promise of toys, television and video games for learnin.' Paper presented at the Sixth Australian and New Zealand Conference on the First Years, Tasmania.

Lankshear, C., & Knobel, M. (2003). *New literacies: Changing knowledge and classroom learning*. Buckingham, UK: Open University Press.

Leonard, D. (2003). Live in your world, play in ours: Race, video games, and consuming the other. *Studies in Media & Information Literacy Education*,

3(4). Retrieved September 25, 2005, from <http://www.utpjournals.com/jour.ihtml?lp=simile/issue12/leonardX1.html>

Leonard, D. (2004) Unsettling the military entertainment complex: Video games and a pedagogy of peace. *Studies in Media & Information Literacy Education*, 4(4). Retrieved September 25, 2005, from <http://www.utpjournals.com/jour.ihtml?lp=simile/issue16/leonard1.htm>

Martino, W., & Pallotta-Chiarolli, M.. (Eds). (2001). *Boys' stuff: Boys talking about what matters*. Sydney, AU: Allen & Unwin.

Myers, D. (2003). *The nature of computer games: Play as semiosis*. New York: Peter Lang.

Newkirk, T. (2002). Foreword. In M. Smith & J. Wilhelm, *Reading don't fix no Chevys: Literacy in the lives of young men* (pp. ix – xi). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Newman, J. (2004). *Videogames*. London, UK: Routledge.

Ray, S.G. (2004). *Gender inclusive game design: Expanding the market*. Hingham, MA: Charles River Media, Inc.

Rowan, L., Knobel, M., Bigum, C., Lankshear, C. (2002). *Boys, literacies and schooling*. Buckingham, UK: Open University Press.

Sanford, K. (2006). Gendered literacy experiences: The effects of expectation and opportunity for boys' and girls' learning. *Journal of Adult and Adolescent Literacy*, 49(4), pp. 302-314.

Smith, M., & Wilhelm, J. (2002). *Reading don't fix no Chevys: Literacy in the lives of young men*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Street, B. (1984). *Literacy in theory and practice*. New York: Cambridge University Press.